PHILADELPHIA, PA.
BULLETIN

E. 718,167
S. 702,577

NOV 2 1965

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Hardware vs. Policy

Running the CIA

Director Raborn Under Attack

By JOSEPH KRAFT

Washington — "Things have reached the point where I'm even beginning to wonder whether the Polaris can possibly be a good missile."

Sarcastic remarks along those lines are heard almost every day in the national intelligence community. The jibes have nothing to do with the missile which is, of course, an excellent one. Rather, they are inspired by the performance of Admiral William Raborn, the former head of the Polaris program, as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Raborn

Like almost everything else about the CIA, the remarks about Admiral Raborn cannot be verified, and verge on gossip. But the gossip is sufficiently high-level and widespread to merit reporting. The more so as even the admiral's defenders do not bother to deny the charges. They merely argue that the attacks are beside the point—that, in fact, the complaints reflect a desirable condition that works to keep the influence of the CIA within state bounds.

Admiral's Background

The basic complaint about the admiral is that he has neither training nor flair for political analysis of developments abroad. The absence of grounding apparently shows itself most dramatically in the highest policy councils of the government.

In these meetings, Admiral Raborn is supposed to mispronounce the names of foreign countries and personalities consistently. His recommendations are said to bear little relationship to the facts he presents. On occasion, apparently, he has broached as if they were fresh matters, subjects that had been exhaustively discussed only five minutes earlier. Sometimes, it seems, his point of departure is the exact opposite of a decision just taken.

A lack of familiarity with policy questions also finds expression on the working level within the CIA.

State of Morale

Thoughtful officials complain that in the final presentation their most careful work is badly mangled. Morale has apparently sunk in the research and analysis sections of the agency, particularly among the group preparing long-run estimates. "They'd be quitting, if they had any place to go," one official of another agency asserts.

The defense against these charges depends on discounting their importance. The starting point of the argument is that with such sophisticated veterans of policy-making about as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and White House aide McGeorge Bundy, the President is hardly dependent upon the special insights and perception or the director of the CIA.

Furthermore, the case for Admiral Raborn continues, the great mass of activities undertaken by the CIA are rooted in technology. They involve, in particular, new developments in photography and in sonics. Like all other large government agencies, this agency is said to have experienced difficulty in digesting the new technological developments and in using them to best advantage to meet the changing demands for information.

His Strong Point

Accordingly, the need of the moment is to bring the agency abreast of its technological possibilities. This is Admiral Raborn's top priority. And in that matter he is said to be doing a good job.

Besides, the argument concludes, the important thing for the welfare of the country is to keep the CIA—with its special vested interest in prolonging the cold war—from playing too large a role in the policy-making process. By having a director more versed in hardware than in policy, the flow of information is maintained without the agency becoming a dominant influence in the basic decisions.

Perhaps so, but that apologia bears the earmarks of rationalization after the event. When the search for a new director to succeed John McCone was on last winter and spring, no one was looking for a man with the ability to muffle the voice of the agency. On the contrary, the administration hit on Admiral Raborn because it was looking for a good manager with the confidence of the Congress.

Complex Job

It is at that point precisely that the shoe pinches. Whatever the special requirements of the moment the case of Admiral Raborn suggests that, in general, running CIA demands some experience in foreign affairs, and a capacity for sensitive analysis and sophisticated articulation.

To hunt for managers likely to inspire the confidence of Congress is to have a formula far more apt to turn up Babbits than men of nice judgment and a feel for penetrating analysis. The fact is that the bluff and the hearty qualities so much esteemed in both managerial and congressional circles are not especially appropriate to the guiding of a complex intelligence effort.